

6. Archaeological investigation of a souterrain at Tateetra, Dundalk, County Louth

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Illus. 1—Location map of Tateetra in relation to the other excavated sites along the route of the M1 Dundalk Western Bypass (Meath County Council National Roads Design Office, based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map)

The souterrain at Tateetra was situated north-west of Dundalk, Co. Louth, and south of the Castletown River in an area of gently undulating topography (Illus. 1 & 2). The site (NGR 302587, 309824; height 10 m OD; ministerial direction no. A010/001) was partly excavated by Aegis Archaeology Ltd between September and December 2004 on behalf of Celtic Roads Dundalk Group, as part of a public-private partnership with the National Roads Authority before construction of the M1 Dundalk Western Bypass. This paper presents a provisional interpretation of the site. A full discussion of the archaeological findings will be published after completion of the post-excavation analysis.



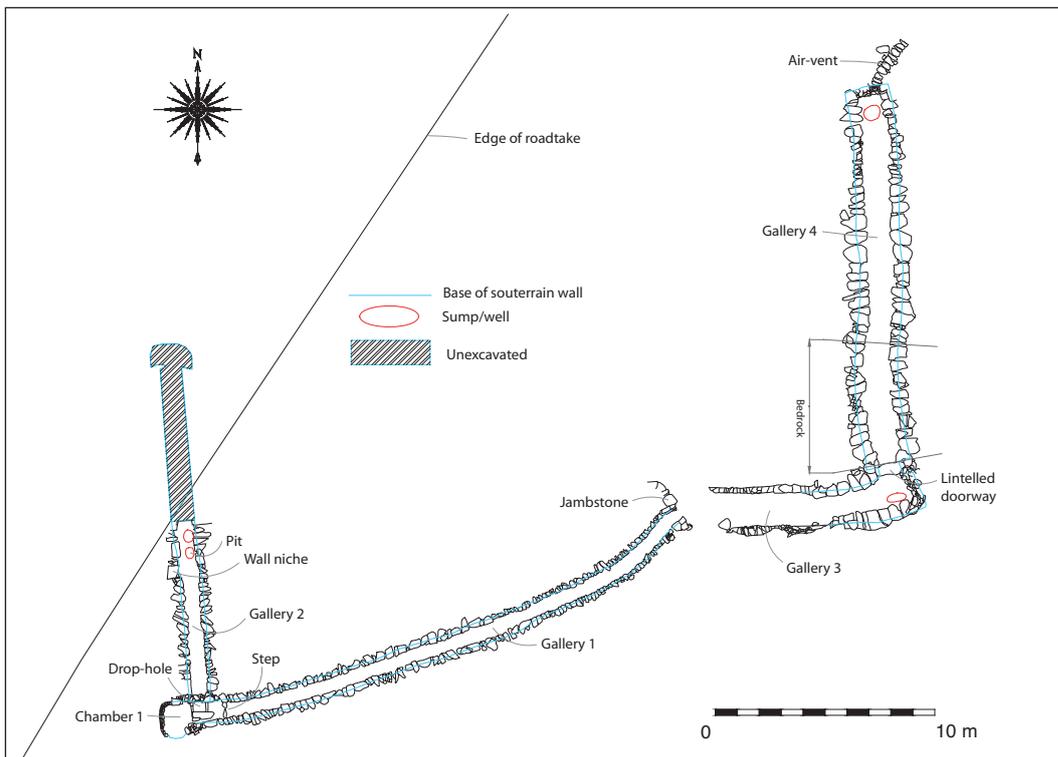
Illus. 2—Aerial view of the souterrain at Tateetra, from the south-west (Aegis Archaeology Ltd)

The souterrain was discovered during works along the north-western side of the proposed road, under the west side of an already constructed road embankment when a drainage trench cut through the south side of a chamber. As this represented a possible danger to the new road (through future collapse) the road embankment was removed, exposing 30 m of the souterrain, with a further 10 m outside of the road corridor. What initially appeared to be the entrance to the souterrain was exposed, but it was quickly seen that the excavation area needed to be extended. Another large section of the new embankment was removed, revealing an additional 30 m-long section of the souterrain. A detailed survey of the structure was undertaken by Gridpoint Solutions Ltd using laser scanning equipment, before and after the removal of the capstones. (The use of this new technology meant that planning by hand was kept to a minimum.) On foot of the excavation the walls were left *in situ*, the passages were filled with gravel and the majority of the capstones were replaced. Nine capstones, three of which were decorated, were retained by Dundalk Museum.

The souterrain was roughly U-shaped in plan. It was drystone built and measured approximately 70 m in total length, incorporating two chambers, four galleries or long passages, two doorways featuring bolt-holes, a drop-hole, a step, three sumps/wells, a pit, a wall niche and an air-vent (Illus. 3).¹ No evidence of an associated settlement was found

¹ An alternative interpretation is that the structures at Tateetra represent not one but two souterrains (Roycroft 2005, 76)—Eds.

A souterrain at Tateetra, Dundalk, County Louth



Illus. 3—Plan of souterrain with capstones removed, showing main structural elements (based on a survey by Gridpoint Solutions Ltd)



Illus. 4—View of Chamber 1, drop-hole providing access to Gallery 2 and step at west end of Gallery 1 (Aegis Archaeology Ltd)

during the excavation, but it is most probably situated beyond the limit of excavation. Alternatively, centuries of agricultural activity may have destroyed the settlement that was once associated with the souterrain at Tateetra.

All of the souterrain walls were drystone built and consisted of roughly coursed shale overlying a basal foundation course of large stones set on edge. The upper courses of the walls were slightly corbelled. (The souterrain was constructed by firstly excavating trenches for the galleries and chambers. The walls would then have been inserted, each section roofed with capstones and the whole structure covered with earth.) Gallery 1 consisted of a small, restricted passage with an oval chamber and a drop-hole at its eastern end (Illus. 4). (A drop-hole is a defensive feature that would have made access difficult for intruders as they would have had to climb up or down to the next section of the souterrain, leaving themselves open to attack.) This drop-hole provided access to Gallery 2, another restricted passage. Gallery 2 was not fully investigated as an 8 m portion of the gallery lay outside the area affected by the road scheme. However, it appeared to terminate in a sub-circular chamber to the north, which was heavily collapsed. Galleries 3 and 4 consisted of larger, less restricted passages, with a lintelled doorway and jambs giving access to Gallery 4. Gallery 3 was badly disturbed at its western end. Most of its length was filled in, and a number of collapsed capstones were found in the passage. Gallery 4 terminated to the north with an air-vent feature.

Galleries 1 and 2 and Chamber 1 were smaller than Galleries 3 and 4 (Illus. 5 & 6). It is unknown whether this represents two phases of construction as the west end of Gallery 3 was disturbed. It would appear from a bracing socket at the east end of Gallery 1 (Illus. 7) that all of the galleries were in use at the same time, as the associated doorway gave access to Galleries 3 and 1. (Similar bracing sockets were noted at the lintelled doorway into Gallery 4 [Illus. 8].) The entrance to the souterrain may have been situated in this area, but evidence of this has been obscured. Alternatively, the souterrain entrance may lie beyond the area affected by the road scheme, in the unexcavated, northern end of Gallery 2.



Illus. 5—View inside Gallery 1 from the east, showing restrictive size (Aegis Archaeology Ltd)

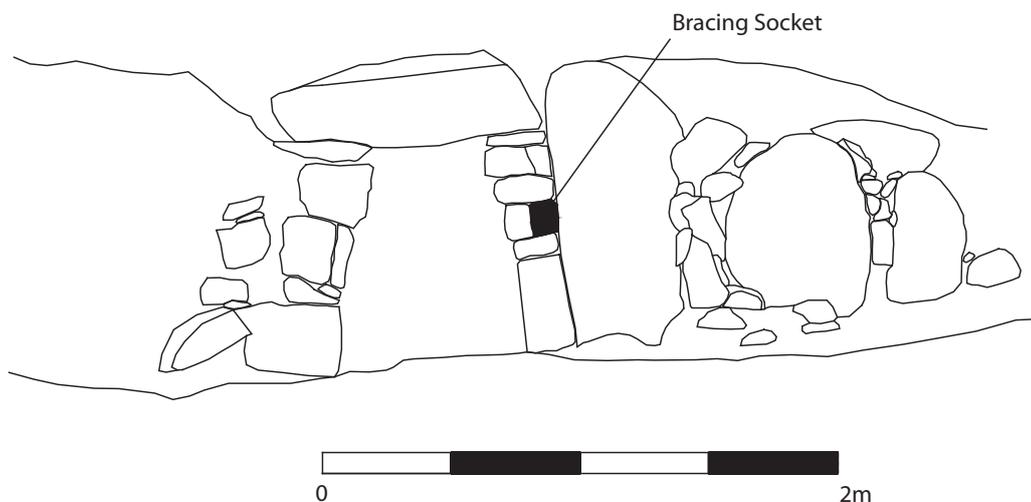


Illus. 6—View inside Gallery 4 from the south, showing less restrictive size (Aegis Archaeology Ltd)

Artefacts

The artefacts recovered from the excavation appear to be consistent with the general date of souterrains in Ireland, which is from the latter half of the first millennium to the early part of the second millennium AD. A copper-alloy stick-pin (late 11th to mid-13th century in date) was found in the floor surface at the east end of Gallery 1, near the entrance. A perforated white bead was recovered from the packing over Gallery 3. There are eight examples of beads from souterrains in Ireland, made from blue glass, amber, polished stone and horse tooth, with a general date of the latter centuries of the first millennium AD (Clinton 2001, 80). Fragments of pottery from a single pot were recovered from the floor of Gallery 2. The pot is decorated and has a 'stamped' rosette. It appears to be an example of the coarse, unglazed domestic pottery known as Souterrain Ware. Souterrain Ware dates from the seventh to the 12th century, and the decoration on the pot places it at the later end of the sequence (S Zajac, pers. comm.).

Two cross-inscribed slabs had been reused as capstones over Gallery 4 at Tateetra. One slab contained five equal-armed crosses on five different faces of the stone (Illus. 9) and is tentatively identified as an altar pillar (T Ó Carragáin, pers. comm.). The second slab was a large stone with a small Latin cross on its underside. There is a theory (O'Rahilly 1946; Warner 1980) that the reuse of cross-slabs in the building of souterrains was intended to ward off the evil associated with being underground. While this possibility cannot be ruled out, it should be noted that at Tateetra none of the crosses on the slabs were clearly visible inside the souterrain. Neither were they placed at strategic locations, such as chambers or



Illus. 7—East-facing elevation drawing showing entrance to Gallery 1 at the east (Gridpoint Solutions Ltd)



Illus. 8—Bolt-holes and bracing sockets on western door-jamb and wall of lintelled doorway into Gallery 4 (Aegis Archaeology Ltd)

entrances. In the case of Tateetra it would appear that the crosses may not have been important to the builders.

A reused stone featuring megalithic art (i.e. the abstract geometric art associated with Neolithic tombs) was employed as the final capstone at the north end of Gallery 4. It was set on edge over the souterrain, with the decorated surface facing north. The decoration consisted, for the most part, of incised lozenge motifs. The decorated face of the stone was damaged, and it was obvious that the weathered surface had broken off in places. The slab



Illus. 9—Cross-inscribed stone, possibly a reused altar pillar, overlying Gallery 4 (Aegis Archaeology Ltd)

had possibly been taken from the site of an archaeological complex, no longer extant, across the Castletown River to the north in the townland of Balregan. This complex (Record of Monuments and Places No. LH007-001) incorporates the sites of two standing stones, two possible cairns, a possible stone alignment and the site of a stone pair. The occurrence of the megalithic art at Tateetra appears to be more opportunistic than deliberate, as the face containing the decoration was completely obscured by fill and the art was noted only when the capstone was removed (Illus. 10).

Function

There are two major theories on the function of souterrains in Ireland—refuge and storage. The storage explanation has been attributed to less complex souterrains with ramped or stepped entrances (Clinton 2001, 105). The easily accessible nature of some souterrains in south-east Scotland prompted Warner (1979, 129) to support the storage view—as these are typically wide and broad with gently sloping entrances—but he noted that it was an inadequate explanation with regard to Irish souterrains. Limbert (1996, 259) saw souterrains as evidence of an increasing reliance on agriculture, at the expense of animal husbandry, and believed that they were used for storing cereals and other produce.

Warner (1980, 96) saw the ringfort and souterrain as a response to a specific problem within a particular socio-economic structure. He believed that warring Irish tribes had stabilised somewhat by the eighth century, allowing the construction of permanent



Illus. 10—Capstone from the north end of Gallery 4 featuring megalithic art (Aegis Archaeology Ltd)

habitation sites (ringforts and open settlements). But local raids still occurred, and this necessitated the retention of the initial line of defence, the ringfort, and the creation of a secondary defence for the ‘non-combatant inhabitants’, the souterrain. Buckley (1986) suggested that concentrations of souterrains reflect the centres of tribal power, such as the Dál Riata in north Antrim and north-east Derry (i.e. the kingship of the Ulaid) and suggested—*contra* Warner—that they reflect an increased need for defence as the tribes still contested control.

From the available literature it is obvious that the function of souterrains should be discussed on a site-by-site basis, drawing on structural elements particular to the souterrain. It is in this regard that a refuge function has been attributed to the souterrain at Tateetra. There are a number of structural elements in support of this view. Although unrestricted in size, the presence of an air-vent at the end of Gallery 4 would suggest that there was a supply of air for occupants who had locked themselves into the gallery. Probably the most obvious elements are associated with the doorways to the east of Gallery 1 and in Gallery 4. In both cases the locations of the bracing sockets—and in Gallery 4 the bolt-holes—are defensive in nature. The doors would have been secured from the interior of the souterrain. A second defensive element would have been the restrictive size of Galleries 1 and 2. There is no standing headroom in either of the passages, and so movement would have been in a crouched position. Equally, the presence of a drop-hole at the west end of Gallery 1, giving access to Gallery 2, would not have been conducive to free movement within the souterrain. If there is an entrance to the souterrain from the unexcavated end of Gallery 2, the drop-hole would have been easily defended by occupants of Gallery 1. If the entrance to the souterrain was from Gallery 1, the drop-hole would still have provided an impediment to any intruders.

The presence of a wall niche and pit in Gallery 2 suggests a secondary storage function for the souterrain, although it is more likely that these features were used during a period of refuge. The restrictive nature of Gallery 2 and the fact that it may have been entered from Gallery 1 through the drop-hole would rule out a primary storage function, as this would

have been an awkward way to gain access to stored goods. If, however, access to the pit and niche was from the north end of Gallery 2, they are positioned too far along the gallery to have been convenient.

Conclusion

The incorporation of cross-inscribed slabs and the associated finds may indicate a construction date in the late first millennium AD, with continued use into the early second millennium. The souterrain appears to have been constructed using locally available stone, except for the granite slabs used in the doorways. The nearby Cooley Mountains are the closest source of granite in the area. The decorated stones may have been taken from nearby sites (for example, the archaeological complex at Balregan), and their reuse in the souterrain appears to represent opportunistic recycling rather than deliberate selection for ritual or symbolic reasons. The finds appear to be consistent with the general date of souterrains in Ireland—the latter half of the first millennium to the early part of the second millennium. No evidence of an associated settlement was found during the excavation, but one surely existed and may yet be identified beyond the limit of excavation. Structural aspects of the souterrain, most notably its restrictive nature and the interior locking arrangement employed at doorways, indicate a primary function of refuge.

Acknowledgements

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